

Educated: A Memoir

By Tara Westover

New York: Random House, 2018

Reviewed by Angela Hallstrom

Tara Westover grew up at the base of Buck's Peak, raised by Latter-day Saint parents in rural southern Idaho. Her father operated a junkyard, and her mother was a self-taught herbalist and midwife. Fueled by fears that powerful, secret forces had infiltrated the federal government and other institutions, Westover's parents distrusted public education and the medical establishment. Her father in particular subscribed to a number of radical beliefs that became more entrenched over time, and he dreamed of a day when his family could live completely "off the grid." As the youngest of the family's seven children, Westover's upbringing was the most isolated of all her siblings. She never attended school or saw a doctor throughout her childhood. She was nine years old when her mother finally agreed to apply for her birth certificate, but even then, none of Westover's family members could recall the exact day in September that she was born.

Westover's memoir, *Educated*, details her life on Buck's Peak, as well as her decision to leave that life behind. Desiring an education beyond the haphazard homeschooling she received as a child and eager to escape the increasingly abusive behavior of her older brother "Shawn" (a pseudonym), Westover decides to apply to Brigham Young University. Encouraged by another brother, Tyler, who had attended BYU himself, Westover purchases an ACT study guide, and in order to pass the test, she resolves to teach herself algebra. On her second attempt at the ACT, Westover earns a score high enough to be admitted to BYU. She enters the university as a seventeen-year-old freshman in 2004, and the trajectory of her life is completely changed.

Educated hit the shelves in February 2018 and quickly became a runaway success, enjoying both popular and critical acclaim. Mentioned on numerous "Best of 2018" lists, from *Publishers Weekly* to *Time* magazine, the memoir has maintained a presence on the *New York Times* Best

Seller list for nine months and counting. The book's enthusiastic reception is well deserved: it is both a compelling page-turner and an insightful meditation on family, memory, and the construction of the self.

What the book is not, however, is a meditation on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints specifically or, even more broadly, on religious faith. Westover no longer considers herself a practicing Latter-day Saint, and though she was raised in a Latter-day Saint family, she takes pains to ensure that readers do not conflate her experience with that of an average member of the Church. An author's note at the beginning of the book reads, "This story is not about Mormonism. Neither is it about any other form of religious belief. In it there are many types of people, some believers, some not; some kind, some not. The author disputes any correlation, positive or negative, between the two" (xi).

While Westover spends some time in the book grappling with spiritual questions, the themes that truly animate the narrative are centered on family. "What does it mean to belong to a family?" Westover asked during a television interview with *CBS This Morning* earlier this year. "What obligations do we have to our family, and are there limits to those obligations?"¹ *Educated* does not provide easy answers to these questions.

Westover deftly characterizes the family members that populate her story. Her father is a larger-than-life figure, confident but paranoid, certain that he is doing right by his family when he forces them to do dangerous work in his junkyard or refuses to take them to the doctor when they are injured or sick. His certainty carries a conviction that his actions are God's will—a conviction that, at times, places his family members' lives at risk. Westover's mother is introduced as a timid woman, so anxious to please that she apologizes for appearing without makeup in her own home. Her confidence increases as her essential oils business takes off, but even though she is treated with deference by her employees, she reverts to subservience when challenged by her domineering husband.

And then there is Shawn, Westover's troubled older brother. During Westover's childhood, Shawn can be kind, even generous at times, but his mean streak is evident as well. As Tara grows into young womanhood, she becomes the target of Shawn's explosive anger, suffering

1. "Tara Westover's Journey from Off-the-Grid Childhood to Cambridge," *CBS This Morning*, aired February 21, 2018, on CBS, 5:25, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/tara-westovers-journey-from-off-the-grid-childhood-to-cambridge/>.

increasingly horrific incidents of emotional and physical abuse. In the hands of a less skillful writer, it would be easy to turn Shawn into a one-dimensional villain, but Westover allows the reader glimpses into the siblings' deep bond. She also describes Shawn's own pain and trauma, particularly a series of head injuries that may or may not have been a factor in his propensity for violence.

Although her brother's abuse is deeply painful, Westover appears just as scarred by her parents' refusal to do anything about Shawn's violent behavior. Some family members—Westover's father in particular—even doubt that she is telling the truth about him. During the second half of the book, as Westover graduates from BYU, earns a prestigious Gates Cambridge Scholarship, and embarks on earning a PhD in history, her formal education moves in lockstep with a more personal search for understanding. Interestingly, both undertakings seem to be asking the same question: how does a person make sense of the past?

At Cambridge, Westover decides to focus on historiography, which is the study of how history is written. She writes, "I needed to understand how the great gatekeepers of history had come to terms with their own ignorance and partiality. I thought if I could accept that what they had written was not absolute but was the result of a biased process of conversion and revision, maybe I could reconcile myself with the fact that the history most people agreed upon was not the history I had been taught" (238).

While studying historians' "biased process of conversion and revision," Westover considers her past. How can she trust her own memories when her loved ones insist they aren't valid? Even her own journal has shifted in meaning over time. As an adult, she rereads an entry from her adolescence, describing an incident when Shawn violently dragged her from a car. Then she finds another entry, written after Shawn had apologized a few days later, maintaining that the whole incident was a misunderstanding. Looking back, she can see why she felt compelled to revise her own story, even to herself. She is more surprised that, as a teenager, she had the courage to write the initial entry in the first place.

As her education progresses, Westover finally concludes it is time to claim her own history. "Not knowing for certain, but refusing to give way to those who claim certainty, was a privilege," Westover writes. "My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs" (197).

At the conclusion of the book, Westover decides to speak her truth, and as a result finds herself estranged from half of her family. While

some family members support her, others, including her parents, deny her version of events. Some even claim she has been influenced by the devil. Now that the memoir has been published, her parents have gone on record disputing their daughter's narrative. Recently, attorney Blake Atkin, speaking on Val and LaRee Westover's behalf, said, "Tara's parents are disappointed Tara would write a book that maligns them, their religion, their country, and homeschooling."² Westover does not agree that her book maligns the Church. "I have a lot of respect for Mormonism," Westover told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "In particular for . . . the people at BYU, all of them Mormon, who helped and befriended me for no reason other than because they were kind, good people."³

Memoir is a slippery art, and memoirists are often dogged by questions about how reliably they can claim their own story as "true." If given a chance to publish their own stories, other members of the Westover family would certainly have different tales to tell. Latter-day Saint readers, as well, might disagree over how much Westover's experience as a member of the Church reflects their own.

But as for Tara Westover, she has ably answered the question once posed by her BYU history professor, Dr. Paul Kerry. "Who writes history?" Kerry wrote on the blackboard many years ago. With the confidence born of an arduous education, Westover is finally able to answer the question for herself. "I do," she says (318). It is a history worth reading.

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2. Necia P. Seamons, "'Educated' Should Be Read with Grain of Salt, Says Family's Attorney," February 23, 2018, *Herald Journal* (Logan, Utah), https://www.hjnews.com/allaccess/educated-should-be-read-with-grain-of-salt-says-family/article_0583f217-6fd2-51de-a891-9ca32adb589c.html.

3. Bob Mims, "Idaho Woman's Best Seller Tells How She Fled Mormon Survivalist Upbringing, Alleged Abuse to Earn Degrees at BYU and Cambridge," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 19, 2018, updated March 21, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2018/03/19/idaho-womans-best-seller-tells-how-she-rose-above-spotty-home-schooling-and-a-mormon-survivalist-upbringing-to-earn-degrees-at-byu-and-cambridge/>.